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Culture and Stigma: Popular Culture and the Case of Comic Books

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This paper argues that a better articulated conception of stigma can enhance the analysis of popular culture. Beginning with the work on stigma by Erving Goffman and other scholars, the article contends that the stigma sometimes attached to the production and consumption of popular culture is distinct from the low status associated with certain forms of popular culture. Unlike low status, stigma discredits cultural forms and practitioners often rendering them problematic. This reassessment of stigma is applied and developed further through a study of comic books, showing the various ways stigma can operate in popular culture. The analysis suggests that stigma significantly impeded the evolution of the comic book as an art form, illustrating the potential negative effects of stigma in popular culture.

KEY WORDS: popular culture; stigma; status; culture; mass media.

Goffman (1963) in his classic work *Stigma* argued that a stigmatized person's social identity is discredited by the power of a single attribute, such as being visually impaired or a drug user. He also argued that such individuals may be viewed as deserving of some kind of intervention. Goffman, however, never addressed stigma in relation to popular culture. Yet the basic aspects of stigma that he outlined resonate with past and present ideologies concerning popular cultural forms and the individuals associated with them. Early jazz, for example, was framed as a music whose audiences fell trancelike into vulgar and wanton behavior (Ogren, 1989), while the fans of

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the Grateful Dead were viewed as directionless, drug-addled nomads with no link to reality (Paterline, 2000).

My interest in popular culture and stigma stems from my research on comic books in America. In reading histories, interviews, columns, and other writings in the subculture of comic books, I found the multiple levels of stigma to be quite remarkable. Comic books have been stigmatized since their introduction in the mid-1930s, and this stigma has affected comic books as well as artists, readers, and fans of comics. I even experienced this stigma in the responses from colleagues when I chose to study comic books, and I found that other comic book scholars in America shared this experience (Pustz, 1999). In my previous work on jazz, stigma also played an important role (Lopes, 2002, 2005). But in once again facing the power of stigma in the world of comic books, I believed it was time to readdress the basic role of stigma in popular culture.

The issue of stigma has appeared in other scholarship on popular art, audiences, and fan cultures. Jensen (2001), for example, points to how fans of popular culture often have their social identities discredited and their behaviors characterized as pathological. Other works on fan culture addressing stigma include Jenkins (1992), Bacon-Smith (1992, 2000), Harrington and Bielby (1995), Pustz (1999), and Hills (2002). Brunsdon (2000) addresses the stigma attached to the soap opera genre, while works by Gamson (1998) and Grindstaff (2002) address the stigma attached to television talk shows. Radway (1984) looks at efforts of female readers to manage the stigma associated with romance novels.

This scholarship, however, does not clearly distinguish between stigma and low status. The framing of popular culture as enmeshed in a hierarchy of cultural distinctions seems inadequate in delineating the difference between stigma and low status. I believe they are closely related, but differ in distinct ways as social phenomena. Low status is usually a precondition for the stigmatization of a cultural form. But low status and stigma are not equivalent, even if they might overlap in terms of cultural forms and practitioners. A popular cultural form could have low status but not be stigmatized (e.g., country music) or have low status and be stigmatized (e.g., rap music). And stigma, unlike low status, makes an individual or cultural form *problematic*. While low status certainly has negative social effects, stigma leads to the discrediting of an individual or cultural form in a global sense, and thus has far more negative effects and elicits more direct action from the people Goffman (1963) calls “normals.”

It seems important to think through in a more general way how stigma works in popular culture. This article begins with a brief review of important points in Goffman's and others' analyses of stigma that elucidate ways of understanding culture and stigma. The second part presents a general

framework for understanding stigma and popular culture, along with a continuum for differentiating between status and stigma. There I focus on my past research on jazz (Lopes, 2002, 2005) and other work in popular culture. The final part applies the general framework on stigma to my more recent research on comic books.

The case study of comic books is based on my research on the 20th-century discourse on comic books. Like my earlier work on the discourse on jazz, my analysis of comic book discourse was divided into two fields based on John Fiske's (1992) distinction between an "official" cultural economy and a "subcultural" economy. Official culture is represented by the general press and academic journals. I analyzed the discourse on comic books in these two official cultural economies from the late 1930s to the present. I used the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, the *New York Times Index*, *JSOTR*, and *LexisNexis*. A comic book subculture that emerged in the 1960s represents the subcultural economy. This subculture eventually included, besides comic books: magazines, books, conventions, websites, and specialty shops (Pustz, 1999). I looked at (1) the fan magazines *Comic Artist*, *Wizard*, and *Comics Journal*; (2) the comic book catalogs *Preview* and *The Standard Catalog of Comic Books*; (3) industry websites for distributors and publishers; (4) fan websites; and (5) books published in the subcultural economy of comic books.

The case study of comic books also reveals one aspect rarely addressed in how stigma affects popular culture. This is the negative effect of stigma on the evolution of a cultural form. The most interesting aspect of the stigma experienced in the world of comic books in North America was how the stigmatization of comic books as subliterate and a children's medium prevented this art form from evolving into more adult genres similar to those in the field of popular literature. This is how comic books evolved in Europe and Japan (Sabin, 1996). One of the greatest complaints in the subculture of comic books is the difficulty of transforming the comic book beyond the limited domain imposed by the stigma associated with this cultural form.

STIGMA

Goffman emphasized that stigma refers not directly to an attribute but to a "special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype" (Goffman, 1963:4). He argued that an attribute that stigmatizes one type of person can just as easily signal the normalcy of another. He also argued that stigma in certain instances is an articulation of social class distinctions. By using the term *stereotype*, Goffman emphasized that stigma was a social construction, not a reflection of an individual's inherent qualities. He

confirms this in his discussion of the “moral career” of stigmatized individuals as they go through different stages of understanding their predicament. Link and Phelan (2001) argue that labeling theory best conceptualizes this social process—especially since stigma theories and their effects can change over time.

The basic effect of stigma is to discredit individuals, or at least subject them to being discredited. As later clarified by Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998:505), stigmatized individuals have an attribute that “conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context.” To be discredited is to be viewed as lacking or inferior to “normals.” It is to be “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963:3). The crucial point is the global nature of such discrediting, which cuts across different social situations and social roles. Goffman also focused on the strategies—stigma management—that individuals adopt to minimize or avoid problematic interaction. Such strategies, for example, involve general control over “signs” indicating the stigma or control over personal information that can lead to being discredited. Individuals with stigmatized attributes, in other words, can attempt to “pass” as normals, which can often lead to victimization. Goffman also emphasized the more global effects of stigma on self-identity, whether experienced as shame, self-hatred, or self-derogation.

Goffman, however, did not address the way social institutions or moral entrepreneurs make individuals with certain attributes problematic and then demand intervention. This labeling of individuals as deviant can lead to viewing them as a threat to the social order or, at least, to themselves. It is important to emphasize that being stigmatized is more than being discredited in social group interaction; it means being susceptible to interventions as extreme as institutionalization, imprisonment, drug treatment, or censorship. Discrimination and power are crucial elements in stigma as a social phenomenon (Link and Phelan, 2001).

Goffman also pointed to how stigmatized individuals can reject the stigma theories of normals through contact with “sympathetic others.” More important, Goffman stressed how stigma acts as an agent for group formation as individuals grapple with its effects. A stigma “can function to dispose members to group-formation and relationships” (Goffman, 1963:24). Group-formation can allow for a collective reinterpretation of normals’ stigma theories, and such reinterpretation can help individuals deal with the negative and discriminatory effects of stigma by validating an alternative theory of the significance of their shared attribute. The collective reinterpretation of normals’ stigma theories through group-formation may also lead to the reshaping of normals’ understanding of this attribute as group members become spokespersons who defend their stigmatized group.

Often such defense leads to collective action by the more vocal members of the socially stigmatized group, including the formation of organizations and publications specifically focused on advocacy.

All these basic aspects of stigma are present in the world of popular culture. We can see the social construction of stigma in how normals and the stigmatized negotiate the meaning of stigma in popular culture. We see it also where popular culture is stigmatized because of its association with specific social groups. Stigmatized participants in popular culture also use stigma management in dealing with normals and the effect of discredited social identities. National moral crusades have been waged against popular culture in America, leading to various interventions from criminal prosecution to censorship. Members of a stigmatized subgroup can reject stigma theories through contact with sympathetic others and group-formation. Group-formation has been critical for their development of alternative theories of their practices. Finally, defense or advocacy also occurs around stigmatized cultural forms and groups. The work of Goffman and others on stigma obviously resonates with the history of popular culture.

STIGMA AND POPULAR CULTURE

How might we approach a general understanding of popular culture and stigma? We can begin by recognizing that stigma occurs in a broader social context in which social class and other social group distinctions play a role in the articulation of stigma theories in popular culture. The general position of popular culture in the United States already articulates social class distinctions (Gans, 1974); for example, the debate over mass culture during the 20th century articulated social class distinctions in the framing of high art and popular art (Swingewood, 1977; Storey, 2001). Beisel (1993) also shows how debates concerning obscenity in the early 20th century articulated class distinctions in the stigmatization of popular pornography, while the nudes enjoyed by an elite audience were defended as high art. And Sternheimer (2003) points to the special role that children as a social group play as victims amid adult fears engendered by broad social change that make popular media a convenient scapegoat. Social class and social group distinctions play out in a variety of ways in how and when stigma occurs in popular culture.

Beginning with the broader context of how stigma articulates social class and social group distinctions, I propose the following eight-point framework for analyzing how stigma works in popular culture. (1) Stigma can attach to various social objects, including both forms and practitioners. (2) Stigma can be global or more specific to genres, styles, or social roles.

(3) Stigma is a process of discrediting forms and practitioners and making them problematic. (4) Stigma usually implies potential harm or pathology. (5) Stigma can lead to various forms of intervention. (6) Stigma elicits defensive claims, stigma management, or alternative theories. (7) Both stigma and stigma management can affect the development of a cultural form. (8) Stigma theories can change over time. This framework provides a path to understanding the variety of ways cultural forms and practices can be stigmatized. It also allows for comparison of different cultural forms and practices, which is particularly important as social class and group distinctions act to elicit or eliminate stigma.

Cultural Forms

Stigma can be attached to cultural forms. It can work at a general level, discrediting a form in its entirety, or at a specific level of genre, style, or content. Few forms are consistently stigmatized or discredited in their entirety. Pornography seems to fit this level of stigma. It has consistently confronted theories that have discredited it and viewed it as problematic (Dean, 1996; Sigel, 2000). Yet even in this case, class distinctions can eliminate or reduce this stigma, as with high-art “nudes” or middle-class pornography like *Playboy Magazine* (Beisel, 1993; Ehrenreich, 1983). So stigma usually works to discredit cultural forms at more specific levels of genres, styles, or idioms. And as the case of pornography demonstrates, such stigma articulates social group distinctions in some way.

Jazz music provides an excellent example of how specific styles of cultural forms are stigmatized (Lopes, 2002, 2005). Critics of jazz music in the 1920s associated it with African American culture. This association drove critics to discredit its vernacular style. Jazz was viewed in general as problematic for its harmful, deviant influence on both audiences and artists. Critics discredited jazz whether played by black or white musicians, or enjoyed by black or white audiences. Women’s clubs and dance associations demanded intervention through strict codes of behavior for dance halls. Older musicians worried that this musical form would corrupt young musicians who caught the jazz bug. Jazz elicited a stigma theory that viewed this style of music as a danger to moral as well as aesthetic conventional values.

Professional musicians in the 1920s, however, had to satisfy the public’s demand for jazz, so they attempted to ward off the stigma associated with this music by claiming to “cultivate” this suspect musical style. At the same time, young musicians who caught the jazz bug in the 1920s were assimilated into the professional class of musicians and its legitimate techniques.

This cultivation of jazz music and musicians also had “wise” defenders such as the famous critic Gilbert Seldes. This management of stigma set jazz on a distinct path of development. Big band “swing” music of the 1930s was the end result of both transforming the vernacular style of jazz and assimilating a new generation of popular musicians. The cultivated jazz style called “swing” eliminated the earlier stigma attached to jazz.

The case of jazz shows how stigma implies that something about a cultural form is problematic; that is, it has harmful or pathological effects. Certain dance styles in the early history of America were discredited by moral authorities for their harmful power to induce deviant behavior (Erenberg, 1981; Peiss, 1986). More contemporary examples include rap and heavy metal music as genres that have been discredited and held suspect for their potential harm (Binder, 1993; Rose, 1994). The recent popularity of “trash” talk shows has elicited stigma theories claiming that such shows are morally corrupt and harmful in their portrayal of asocial behavior (Grindstaff, 2002). And these examples are not arbitrary, since they also show how stigma reflects race, class, and other social group distinctions. Nasaw (1993) points to how the moral protestations against popular dance in the past stemmed from class and racial prejudices. And Binder (1993) argues that the stigmatization of rap and heavy metal music also articulated racial and class distinctions. Grindstaff (2002) also argues that the stigma of trash talk shows reflects a class hierarchy of appropriate and inappropriate content.

The case of jazz also shows how stigma works to elicit some form of defense on the part of its practitioners or “wise” defenders. Binder (1993), examining heavy metal and rap music in the late 1980s and early 1990s, found that several “frames” of defense were used to ward off detractors of these musical genres. Radway (1984) shows a strategy of stigma management among the authors of historical romance novels who deflect stigma by developing historical accuracy through research. In the case of pornography, intervention has led to a number of strategies of management, from going underground into a shadow economy to the “passing” of pornography with the introduction of mainstream publications like *Playboy Magazine* (Ehrenreich, 1983).

The history of stigma and popular cultural forms also points to how stigma is a social construction created through a labeling process. Binder (1993) argues that the crusade against heavy metal and rap music involved a labeling process that articulated a racial ideology. Heavy metal was framed mostly as a potential threat to its audience, while rap was framed mostly as a general threat to the social order. Brigman (1997) highlights how the stigmatization of pornography changes over time, depending on varying legal definitions of obscenity as well as the political orientation of various

anti-pornography groups. Both Binder (1993) and Brigman (1997) note that labeling involves both the detractors of popular culture as well as its defenders.

But what is the effect of stigma on particular cultural forms? The case of jazz shows how stigma can lead to the transformation of a cultural form. Erenberg (1981) also shows how leaders of social dance in the early 20th century, like Irene and Vernon Castle, assimilated popular vernacular dance styles to more socially acceptable styles. Doherty (1999) argues that the Hayes Code, which imposed a set of standards for acceptable moral content, did have an effect on Hollywood film until the 1960s. On the other hand, while the crusade against heavy metal and rap led to advisory labels for recordings, it did not lead to any significant change in the lyrics of these genres or to their complete demise in the popular music market (Garofalo, 1997). And Grindstaff (2002) argues that the criticism of trash talk shows has had no appreciable effect on their content or popularity. Stigma thus has the potential to affect the development of a cultural form, though it does not always do so.

Cultural Practitioners: Producers/Artists

Producers and artists also can be the social objects of stigma theories. But how are such artists and producers discredited or viewed as problematic? Are their social identities spoiled in a global sense, or are they stigmatized in a specific role within their own profession? Does the effect on social identity depend on specific forms, specific attributes given to producers, or other attributes such as class, race, or gender? Have artists and producers attempted stigma management or defended themselves against stigma theories? And finally, have artists and producers significantly changed their practices in response to stigma?

The stigma of early jazz in the 1920's popular press focused on the music not on musicians (Lopes, 2002). The social identity of jazz musicians was not stigmatized in a global sense during this period. Only within the professional world of music were they stigmatized. Associated with vernacular jazz, they were viewed as "illiterate" amateurs, untrained in legitimate musical techniques. Only jazz musicians who assimilated into the professional culture had lucrative careers during the swing era of the 1930s and 1940s. So by the 1930s, the stigma within their professional field actually transformed the practices of certain jazz musicians who combined jazz practices with the cultivated techniques of professional musicians. This combination set the foundation for the later emergence of modern jazz in the 1950s.

While swing legitimized jazz music, from the 1930s to the early 1960s, black and white jazz musicians' social identities were stigmatized in the popular imagination and by social scientists (Lopes, 2005). Ironically, at a time when these musicians were respected professionals in their field, those outside the field saw them as asocial and deviant and portrayed them as such in novels, movies, and academic journals, as well as in the press. Normals' stigma theory refracted the stigma of sexual promiscuity, drug use, and heavy drinking associated with these musicians, not the music they performed. And such a stigma led at times to intervention. Federal and local authorities targeted jazz musicians and clubs, and in New York City cabaret cards were revoked for drug violations, preventing musicians from performing at legitimate venues.

The jazz press went to great lengths to counteract the stigma of jazz musicians and jazz culture, but to no avail. And this press continually complained about how jazz musicians themselves were not particularly interested in managing their stigma. Nor did this stigma affect the practice of jazz musicians during this period. What changed the stigma of jazz culture was its actual decline and disappearance. By the 1970s jazz was found in more legitimate venues such as festivals, concerts, and colleges and performed by a new generation of jazz musicians, many of whom came from middle-class backgrounds and had conservatory or college training.

The case of jazz musicians shows how artists can be stigmatized with respect to their social roles in a professional field or in a more global sense as their social identities are held suspect by normals. While their professional roles were spoiled in relation to their artistic practices, their social identities were spoiled in relation to specific attributes distinct from these practices. In the case of pornography, because of the stigma associated with it, its producers are stigmatized both in a global sense and in the profession of filmmaking. Black rap artists' social identities, on the other hand, have been stigmatized in terms of racial stereotypes of violence and criminality (Rose, 1994). It is clear that the stigmatization of artists can occur within a variety of contexts.

When producers are stigmatized as presenting a potential harm, we can expect the possibility of intervention on the part of normals. This was certainly the case for jazz musicians. And intervention against pornography and obscenity has also occurred, involving the persecution of artists, publishers, and distributors (Dean, 1996; Boyer, 2002). Rap musicians have also experienced intervention, from specific prosecutions such as that of 2-Live-Crew in Florida to difficulties with police harassment and in organizing concerts (Binder, 1993; Rose, 1994). Popular artists have been subject to a variety of interventions by normals.

Cultural Practitioners: Audiences/Fans

Audiences and fans can also be stigmatized. These practitioners can find that their social identity is spoiled in terms of intelligence, rationality, sociability, maturity, morality, or addictive and violent behavior. A number of audiences and fans of popular culture have been stigmatized in these ways (Jensen, 2001; Bielby and Bielby, 2004). I found in my research, however, that jazz audiences and fans were not stigmatized (Lopes, 2002). Instead, they were viewed mostly as victims of either jazz music in the 1920s or deviant jazz culture from the 1930s to the 1960s. For this reason, my discussion of audiences focuses on the stigmatization of fan cultures.

Fandom is an interesting stigmatized cultural practice because, while the stigma is widespread in certain respects, not all “fandom” is stigmatized. Jensen (2001) argues that what separates the opera “lover” and antique “collector” from the stigmatized fan of heavy metal music is status; simply put, it is the fandom of low-status popular culture that normals view as problematic. Jensen also notes that fans of high-status forms are viewed as intelligent and rational, while fans of low-status forms are viewed as emotional and irrational. What also is interesting about the relationship between stigma, the objects of fandom, and fandom itself, is that an object might have low-status, but it is not necessarily stigmatized as its appreciative fans are. While science fiction is a low-status form, it has not been stigmatized in America as pornography or rap music have been. Here, only the fans are discredited and viewed as problematic. Trekkies are stigmatized, not the television show *Star Trek* and its offshoots. So, given the obvious prejudice in labeling certain lovers of culture as fans and others not, stigmatized fandom could be seen as a more specific stigma of a *style* of fandom (Fiske, 1992; Grossberg, 1992; Jensen, 2001). Even within fandom, hard-core fans are often discredited, while casual fans are not (Harrington and Bielby, 1995).

We see that stigma theories do not necessarily incorporate both form and practitioner. Binder (1993) argues, for example, that heavy metal fans were viewed as normals susceptible to the deviant influence of this stigmatized music. On the other hand, science fiction fandom is stigmatized but not the genre (Jenkins, 1992). Yet stigma theories can stigmatize both a form and its practitioners, as with rap music, rap artists, and rap audiences (Rose, 1994). Even with regard to rap, however, the fluidity of stigma is apparent, as this music eventually reached a large, middle-class, white male audience who were viewed more as susceptible to rap’s deviant culture than as stigmatized themselves. Stigma theories obviously work in a variety of ways in terms of cultural practitioners.

Fan culture also points to how group-formation around cultural practices can provide a basis for rejecting stigma theories, generating alternative theories, and defending and advocating both the cultural practices as well as the cultural forms associated with them. Bielby and Bielby (2004) argue that fans' simple possession of "expert knowledge" of a cultural form sets a popular aesthetic that works against the power of elite critics in general. Fiske (1992) moves further in noting that fandoms are interpretive communities that share a unique discourse about their object of consumption and about themselves as fans. In terms of stigma, Hills (2002:67) argues that a "discursive mantra" exists in fandom of "a relatively stable discursive resource which is circulated within niche media and fanzines and used (by way of communal rationalization) to ward off the sense that the fan is 'irrational.'" Jenkins (1992) also highlights the importance of science fiction fan culture in constructing alternative theories to legitimate science fiction and fandom—a general process of practioners constructing what Fiske (1992) calls their own "subcultural economy" against official culture (i.e., normals).

Moving beyond fandom of popular culture I would like to consider a general aspect of consumers and stigma. The stigmatization of consumption is what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as the "culturally arbitrary." It is most often a refraction of distinctions of class, race, gender, or other subordinate social groups. Yet this stigma is doubly arbitrary, since not all consumption by subordinate communities is stigmatized. It may be viewed as being in poor taste or superficial but not as discrediting the social identity of the individuals or making them problematic. The arbitrariness of stigmatized consumers is again apparent in how attributes of class, race, or gender under certain circumstances mitigate being stigmatized. The inoculation of white, middle-class consumers against stigma initially constructed around black culture, black artists, or black consumers is a common phenomenon in the United States. And Beisel (1993) shows how working-class consumers of "nudity" are stigmatized, while elite consumers are viewed as having sophisticated tastes that inoculate them from potential harm. The whole strategy of Hugh Hefner in "mainstreaming" pornography in *Playboy* involved constructing the ideal, middle-class, professional playboy consumer (Ehrenreich, 1983). The point is to recognize how certain social groups are more prone than others to be stigmatized in their consumption of culture.

STIGMA AND STATUS

My framework on stigma and popular culture also is helpful in addressing the relationship between stigma and status. As noted at the beginning of this essay, stigma and status are certainly closely related social phenomena.

But in terms of both discrediting and problematizing a form or practitioner, normals make a cognitive leap beyond simple dislike or imputing inferior tastes or intelligence. Stigma usually implies that something is inappropriate, wrong, and, at the extreme, harmful or pathological. Ang (1988), for example, notes that the critique of romance novels is not a simple matter of dislike, but stigmatizes this genre as harmful to women's interests. Jenkins (1992:17) argues that "fans' transgression of bourgeois taste and disruption of dominant cultural hierarchies insures their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of these standards." Jenkins also explains that the stigma of cultural forms implies "harmful social effects," and the stigma of cultural practitioners implies that they are "intellectually debased, psychologically suspect, or emotionally immature." Certainly forms and individuals with low status are discredited to a certain extent outside their interpretive communities, but not problematized as they are by stigma. And the extreme of intervention against stigmatized forms or practitioners highlights the greater negative effect of stigma and the cognitive leap beyond the low-status implication of merely poor or inferior taste.

The example of popular music highlights the difference between stigma and status. Bryson (1996) shows that the musical genres enjoyed by fans with the least education—gospel, country, rap and heavy metal—retain low status among musically tolerant "cultural omnivores" who indicate a dislike for such genres. Yet in the late 1980s and early 1990s only heavy metal and rap music were viewed as dangerous and requiring intervention (Binder, 1993). And Garofalo (1997) argues that the rise of country music at this time was directly related to the attacks against rock and rap music. Clearly, while country music and its listeners have a low status in terms of the hierarchy of distinctions in musical taste in America, this music and its listeners benefited from the stigmatization of heavy metal and rap music. Even if Bryson found that many cultural omnivores disliked country music, disliking a cultural form is not the same as discrediting it and finding it problematic. No one needed to defend country or gospel music to the Parents Music Resource Council. It is clear that stigma had a different effect than did low status in the world of popular music.

Given, however, the shifting construction of stigma theories, status and stigma are intimately intertwined: a form and its practitioners can move from low status to stigmatization and back again. Bryson (1996) argues that even ascription of low status can be viewed as moving from the preferences of particular status groups to their actual dislikes. Following Bryson, I propose a continuum moving from low status to stigma in popular culture. This continuum moves from (1) low status indicated in preferred forms and practices to (2) low status indicated in disliked forms and practices, (3) stigma

indicated in discredited and problematic forms and practices, (4) stigma indicated in forms and practices viewed as harmful and pathological, and (5) stigma indicated in forms and practices eliciting forms of intervention. Such a continuum allows us to differentiate between status and stigma and to chart the social construction of stigma and status in popular culture.

In applying my framework to forms, artists, and audiences, this discussion shows the complex ways stigma works in popular culture. More important, however, is my point that stigma always discredits a social object and makes it problematic. From this basic point, the question remains whether interventions against these social objects occur or whether forms of stigma management or group-formation occurs. I have also shown that stigma can affect the development of both forms and artists. Finally, this discussion shows how stigma and status lie on a continuum of cultural distinction with distinct consequences for those social objects subject to stigma theories. Now I turn to a detailed case study of comic books and stigma.

STIGMA AND THE WORLD OF COMIC BOOKS

Since the introduction of comic books in the mid 1930s, stigma has been associated with the form itself, its content, and its producers, creators, readers, and fans. The world of comic books, therefore, presents an excellent case for applying the framework introduced above. This section begins with a brief history of comic books and then analyzes stigma in relationship to the comic book as a form, the producers of comic books, and the readers/fans of comic books.

A Very Short History of Comic Books

The first introduction of the standard format for American comic books was *Funnies on Parade* in 1933.² By the early 1940s, a lucrative market of comic books for children and adolescents existed with a variety of genres: adventure, action, mystery, superhero, teen, romance, and jungle queen. In 1938 Action Comics #1 introduced Superman, the first comic book superhero. Disney entered the market with Donald Duck in 1938, while the teen character Archie had his own comic book by 1942. Comic books aimed at women appeared with *Sheena: the Queen of the Jungle* in 1939, *Wonder Woman* in 1941, followed by such comic books as *Tessie*

²For histories published for the general market, see, for example, Daniels (1971); Robbins and Yronwode (1985); and Goulart (1986). Academic books on this history include Sabin (1993, 1996), Nyberg (1998), Pustz (1999), and Wright (2001).

the Typist. The more serious *Classics Illustrated* was introduced in 1941 to expose children to classical literature. The early 1940s saw a comic book market with monthly sales of 25 million copies, 125 different titles appearing monthly, and annual sales at nearly 30 million dollars (*Newsweek*, 27 December 1943:55). The most popular comic book, *Superman*, reached average sales of 1,250,000 per issue (*Publishers Weekly*, 18 April 1942:1478).

In the post-World War II period comic books continued to experience a boom with a diversification of genres such as romance, crime, horror, and science fiction. This expansion involved catering to more adult readers, and comic books thus featured more adult content (Sabin, 1993). During the war, comic books were distributed to soldiers as cheap and exchangeable entertainment. After the war, a new, adult-oriented market developed that coincided with a boom in romance comic books for adult females. The superhero genre declined in sales and lost its dominance in the market. By 1949, for example, romance comic books outsold all other genres (*Time*, 22 August 1949:41). By 1953, the boom market had 650 titles, a monthly circulation of 70–100 million, and revenue at 70 million dollars (*Publishers Weekly*, 1 May 1954:1906).

Critics argued that one-quarter of comics sold in 1953 were crime or horror comics (*Time* 3 May 1954:78, 27 September 1954:77). So such titles as *Crime Does Not Pay* and *Tales from the Crypt* elicited a national anti-comic book crusade that eventually led to a self-imposed industry code for comic books in 1954. The crusade succeeded in eliminating most adult-content comic books (Nyberg, 1998). It also helped to initiate a decline in the comic book market (Sabin, 1993). The market continued to decline during the 1960s, with sales dropping as much as 50% (*Comics Journal Special*, October 1997:3). Many older genres faded away, and the superhero genre became the predominant genre in the market (Sabin, 1993).

In the 1970s, comic book distribution significantly shifted from newsstands and other general retail outlets to special comic book shops (*Comics Journal Special*, October 1997:4). The new market relied on direct distribution: shops preordered comic books with strict limitations on return of unsold issues. This change led to a change in the percentage and type of individuals reading comic books (*Comics Journal Special*, October 1997:4–5). By the late 1970s, the comic book market was a small subculture of mostly adolescent and college-age male readers who frequented specialty comic book shops. With the growing interest in comic books as investments in the 1980s, sales increased into the early 1990s, until suddenly in 1993–1994 the market entered a crisis with a sudden and steep decline in sales (*Money*, April 1982:170–72; *Comics Journal Special*, October 1997:6). Since then, the market has remained in crisis. In 1997 a successful, mid-level comic book was reported to have monthly sales of 40,000–60,000, and the most

successful comic book, *Amazing Spiderman*, had monthly sales of 234,000 in 1995, far outpacing the closest competitor by more than double the sales (*Comics Journal Special*, October 1997:6).

The above history focuses on “mainstream” comic books. In the late 1960s, however, an underground comic book market appeared that centered on the counterculture movement of the time. These comic books were sold in “head shops” (Estren, 1987), and the market lasted until the mid-1970s. In the mid-1980s, what are commonly referred to as alternative comic books appeared (Sabin, 1996). They were published by independent comic book publishers and sold in comic book shops. The alternative comic book market brought women back to comic book readership, although male readers still dominate the market (*Washington Times*, 6 February 2002:A02). Independent publishers in 2003 represented roughly 35% of the direct market, but even this share depended less on alternative comic books than independent comic books based on popular genres like adventure, fantasy, and crime (<http://www.diamondcomics.com/market.share>, retrieved 19 June 2003). Today, American comic books are still dominated by the superhero genre, although a diverse array of genres for both children and adults does exist. Japanese comic books—*manga*—also have become increasingly popular over the last few years, catering to a young adult market.

The Comic Book as Cultural Form

Nyberg (1998:1) argues that since their introduction, critics have vilified comic books and “comic book reading was defined as a problem.” This stigma theory attacked the medium itself. Critics viewed comic books as subliterate and feared they would disrupt children’s development of literacy. Comic books’ poor quality and small print also were feared to harm children’s vision. In general comic books were seen as poor-quality, unimaginative works that promoted a fantasy world. A few educators argued that no evidence existed to confirm the harmful effects of comic books feared by teachers, librarians, and parents. Nyberg, however, found that critics in newspapers, magazines, and journals ignored these academics and continued to stigmatize comics. This criticism also established a long-lasting assumption that comic books were strictly a children’s medium.

Comic books also were immediately condemned for their content. This criticism, however, was genre-based. Nyberg (1998) and Wright (2001) point to the 1940 editorial “A National Disgrace” by Sterling North in the *Chicago Daily News* as the first national assault against comic books that was reprinted, according to Nyberg, in more than 40 newspapers and magazines. North claimed that the “bulk of these lurid publications depend for

their appeal upon mayhem, murder, torture, and abduction. . . . Superhuman heroics, voluptuous females in scanty attire, blazing machine guns, hooded 'justice,' and cheap political propaganda were to be found on almost every page. . . . Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the 'comic' magazine" (Wright, 2001:27). Other editorials and articles in the early 1940s condemned the content of comic books (e.g., *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1941:105–7; *Christian Century*, 4 November 1942:1349–51).

But it was not until after World War II that a national movement in America against comic books would take off. Nyberg (1998) argues that this movement adopted two tactics: community decency crusades and legislative action. Community decency crusades made interventions in a variety of ways. Special organizations like the Catholic National Office for Decent Literature established blacklists for comic books. National and local groups were organized to monitor retailers, and in certain communities groups gathered to ritually burn comic books (*New York Times*, 29 June 1948:20, 11 November 1948:34, 30 November 1948:32, 11 December 1948:18). In 1949, Henry E. Schultz, a member of the New York City Board of Education and a defender of comic books, noted the rise of a national moral crusade against them. "Women's clubs, churches and civic organizations took up the cry and finally the great National Congress of Parents and Teachers with a membership of six million made the drive against comics a cornerstone of its national program. . . . In towns, villages and municipalities throughout the country sheriffs, prosecutors, mayors, councilman and the law-makers were goaded and prodded into action and many did their best to please and appease the angry torrent which has been loosed, . . . [and] finally to cap the climax mass burnings of comic books were publicly held in several communities" (*Journal of Educational Sociology*, December 1949:215–24). From 1948 to April 1954, when the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency met in New York City to investigate comic books, the *New York Times* published more than 90 articles related to proclamations by civic organizations, state legislative bills, local ordinances, and local actions against comic books.

The national attention of the senate hearings and anti-comic book crusaders coupled with the fear of legislation led the comic book industry to implement a self-censoring Comics Code in 1954 (Nyberg, 1998). The Comics Code virtually eliminated comic book genres such as horror and crime, while cleaning up the remaining content (Wright, 2001). The code eliminated adult content and reestablished comic books as a children's medium. This change in the industry also brought the superhero genre back as the dominant genre after it had lost its hold following the war.

By the late 1960s adult content had reappeared in comic books with the rise of underground comics (Estren, 1987). The adult content of underground comics included explicit sexual and violent content as well as radical social and political criticism. Intervention by moral watchdogs and the state reappeared in the early seventies as the adult content of the underground comics was attacked through existing obscenity laws (*New York Times*, 19 May 1974:55). The underground comic book market collapsed by the end of the 1970s (Estren, 1987).

In the early 1980s, alternative comic books and newly introduced adult-oriented comic books put out by mainstream publishers established a foothold in the direct market that emerged with the rise of special comic book shops. The shift from newsstands and general retail outlets to comic book shops allowed smaller publishers and retailers to sell comic books that were not subject to the Comics Code. But since all comic books were part of the direct market and specialty shop system, comic books once again caught the eye of religious watchdog groups and the state, which again used obscenity laws to attack artists, publishers, and retailers (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, www.cbldf.org/history, retrieved 16 June 2005). While intervention against comic books never reached the national level of the moral crusade in the late 1940s and early 1950s, some of these efforts were successful. In 1986, the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (CBLDF) was established to fight censorship. Scattered prosecutions continued during the 1990s, and the CBLDF has remained active.

This brief history of comic book censorship highlights how this form experienced a process of stigmatization that both discredited comic books and framed them as problematic and deserving of some form of intervention. While the stigma theory of comic books involved discrediting this form as simply subliterate, at times of interventions, comic books were viewed as also socially or morally harmful. This stigmatization, however, moved beyond a question of content. Comic book content remains stigmatized as serving masculine fantasy identification in superhero comics or serving immoral desires in comic books with sexually explicit material. But a crucial aspect of the stigma of comic books has been global criticism of them as a medium. The stigma theory of comic books as strictly a children's medium has had a significant effect. As comic book fans and artists point out, newspaper comic strips were never viewed in this fashion. And the recent success of manga has not elicited stigma theories because the genres imported from Japan are oriented to children and adolescents. Most interventions against comics were attacks on comic books with adult content published for adults, particularly since the 1960s. As the CBLDF makes clear, it viewed the intervention in the 1980s as stemming from "various

religious and conservative leaders ... claiming that ‘comics are for kids’” (<http://www.cbldf.org/history>, retrieved 17 Oct. 2001).

Besides the stigmatization of comic books as a juvenile medium, artists and fans of comic books still note that comic books are stigmatized as less than literature and less than visual art (Sabin, 1996). Comic books, to borrow from Goffman, are viewed by normals as not quite a full medium, capable of engaging only individuals with immature and unsophisticated tastes. The stigma theory of comic books as subliterate stems from their mixture of image and text. The visual element is not stigmatized per se; illustrated literature has never been stigmatized, because text was separate from image and therefore preserved its sanctity. But for many critics the “transgressive” mix of image and text in comic books undermined the supposedly superior quality of print culture as well as the unique qualities of visual culture (Varnum and Gibbons, 2001).

Practice in Comic Books: Artists and Producers

In the early years, comic book artists were stigmatized within the world of graphic art. The view of comic books as a mass-produced product of poor quality made artists who worked in this industry susceptible to being discredited as graphic artists. It was common for graphic artists to use fake names when working for the industry for fear of doing irreparable damage to their long-term careers. Here we see how a stigma can transfer from a form to those who produce it. Comic strip artists were respected, as were graphic illustrators for children’s books, but comic strips were viewed as adult material, and children’s books as legitimate literature. Only comic book artists in the world of graphic art seemed to fear being discredited and therefore feel the need to “cover” themselves in order to “pass” as normals in the graphic art world. In a book of interviews compiled by the editors of the *Comics Journal*, first-generation comic book artist Will Eisner remembered, “[N]o one in my shop used their right names. ... All of them there, by the way, were there as a kind of stepping place, that was a first stop to either, hopefully, dreaming of becoming a syndicated cartoonist for the newspapers, or going into book illustration. ... Comic book artists then were regarded both socially and in the profession as what the Germans called an *Untermensch*, a subhuman. It was not uncommon for those of us who were doing comic books not to say we were doing comic books; when we were at a cocktail party, we’d say we did illustrations” (Groth and Fiore, 1988:16). And as Goffman (1963) argued, stigma management can lead to victimization. Comic book artists agreed to give publishers the rights to their work partly in order to keep their anonymity.

Outside of earlier accounts, the level of stigma directed at comic book artists is not a major theme in interviews found in fanzines and books today in the subculture of comic books. Certainly, many artists talk of the rejection of comic book art in art and graphic art schools, and the more general negative attitude of the fine art world toward comic book art and artists. But this phenomenon is linked more to low status than to stigma. Comic book artists since the earlier accounts do not discuss efforts at stigma management. By the 1980s, a few alternative comic book artists had been hired as graphic artists, often on the basis of their comic book art. With the rise of a comic book fan culture in the 1960s, comic book artists have found a community that validates their work as worthy of attention and praise. This community of “sympathetic others” provides an alternative view of the legitimacy of the comic book artist.

Practice in Comic Books: Audiences and Fans

Comic book readers did not suffer the same fate as artists in the early years of comic books. During this period, comic book readers were viewed more as victims of the potential harms of a discredited form. The decline in the mass market, however, led to a change in the type of individual who read comic books on a regular basis. In the 1970s, the comic book market was transformed into what Matthew Pustz (1999) calls a fan “comic book culture.” Both his work and my own research inform this section on comic book fans and stigma.

In the 1970s, comic book culture was a small subculture of mostly adolescent and college-age male readers (The alternative comic book market would have more females in its readership.). The male comic book fans that frequented specialty shops soon found themselves labeled as “fanboys.” These shops were often located in nondescript shopping malls—windows covered with posters, dark, and damp—their marginal status generally signaled by their appearance. These shops catered not only to superhero fanboys, but also to readers of comic book pornography, a lucrative genre for both retailers and publishers. A fanboy on the fan website iFanboy lamented the stereotype of fanboys and the additional sordid reputation of comic book shops. “Most people, and when I say people I mean women, consider comic book readers dirty, overweight, acne ridden, and immature geek perverts. Well why not? Have you seen where we shop? Most comic book stores are dirty and smelly. When you walk in you hope to god that’s dirt on the floor and not dandruff. . . . In any given comic book store, walk two steps down from the Superman rack and you can look at Cherry

Poptart" (http://www.ifanboy.com/view/.cgi/columns/guest/landoftheunwashed_033001, retrieved 2 May 2001).

The basic fanboy's social identity is discredited generally as asocial—poor interpersonal skills, lack of intelligence and lack of self-esteem. But this also translates into social roles as fanboys are viewed as poor students, poor partners, or poor workers. "Geek" is a common pejorative used within the subculture of comic books as a self-identification of fans as failures in the eyes of normals. The alienation of fans from normals, whether teachers or peers, is another common theme. Fangirls on the fan website Sequential Tart described their experiences as geek children. "I was an outcast because of my penchant for reading instead of wanting to be up on fashion or whatever band or teen idol was cool at the time. . . . Geeks were not popular. They were the quiet kids, or the spastic kids, or the ones who liked computers or comic books" (www.sequentialtart.com/archive/apr99/geek squad, retrieved 22 May 2002). Fanboys also are viewed as suffering from arrested development, particularly as they grow older and remain committed to comic books. As one fangirl suggested in her fanzine article "Dating Tips for Fan-Boys," "If you do get serious about a young woman, you may have to do a bit of growing up. I'm not asking you to stop being a fanboy or a pop culture geek . . . but realize that commitment takes a bit of maturity . . . you can still be a fanboy, but it would help if you decided to become a fanMAN, too" (http://www.sequentialtart.com/dec01/art_1201_1, retrieved 4 Dec. 2001).

Fanboys and fangirls also commonly make self-derogatory or self-effacing comments about themselves that reflect the stigma theory on comic book fans. These expressions are evident in this note sent by Love Struck in Los Angeles to the Comicfanmag.com advice column "Ask Dr. Doom," "I really like this girl at school and I want to ask her to the prom. The problem is I'm kind of a geek. I'm in [a] band, I read comic books and I'm not good at sports. What should I do? I was thinking of maybe immersing myself in the black arts and casting some kind of spell on her. I don't know. What would you do?" (http://www.comicfanmag.com/askdoom11_colm, retrieved 17 October 2001) Or as one comic book artist admitted, talking about his childhood, "I guess you could say I was your average dork" (http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/dec99/indy_1299, retrieved 4 Dec. 2001). Such comments include references to the addictive nature of comic book fandom. One fangirl wrote of her comic book addiction in her Sequential Tart article "Confessions of a Female Comic Book Junkie." "From that moment on, I was hooked. I was calling comic book stores all over the Las Vegas area like a junkie looking for her next fix, asking, 'Do you have any back issues of this book?' And let me tell you something, my fellow junkies, it is not easy getting a comic book store owner to take you seriously when

you tell him that you live 268 miles away but you PROMISE that when you come into town next month you will stop by and pick up your books" (<http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/sept01>, retrieved 16 May 2002).

The fanboy or fangirl image is a stereotype, and as Goffman argues, stigma is the relationship between an attribute and stereotype. The comic book becomes a sign of the asocial and obsessive individual, the geek or the dork. Does this mean that comic book fans are never asocial? Does this mean comic book fans are not obsessed with attaining each issue, and back issue, of their favorite comic books? No. But what constitutes asocial in terms of an individual's social identity? What constitutes obsessive or addictive behavior in consuming a favored cultural form? What leads fanboys and fangirls to label themselves as geeks or dorks or addicts? And, finally, why is there assumed to be a relationship between comic books, asocial behavior and addiction? The stigmatization of fanboys or fangirls matches an attribute (reading comics as young adults or older) with a stereotype (comic books as a children's medium), and then this "arrested development" is taken to be symptomatic of a more general asocial or addictive personality.

It is further ironic that the "presentation of self" adopted by many fanboys and fangirls becomes evidence not that the person is a creative rebel (which is how fanboys and fangirls most often see themselves), but evidence of a failure to adapt to the normal world. This last point is particularly important since the appearance and many of the behaviors of fanboys and fangirls develop after they enter comic book culture. In identifying with this subculture, they adopt what Fiske (1992) calls its "enunciative productivity." Fandoms are interpretive communities that share a unique discourse about their objects of consumption and about themselves as fans. This interpretive community also prescribes the "styling of hair or make-up, the choice of clothes or accessories [that] are ways of constructing a social identity and therefore of asserting one's membership [in] a particular fan community" (Fiske, 1992:38). Individuals who identify with a stigmatized interpretive community become susceptible to stigmatization regardless of their actual complex personalities and abilities.

At the same time, however, the self-referential comments by comic book fans are in part a co-optation of the normals' stigma theory, an acknowledgement of the normals' perceptions of fanboys and fangirls that transforms them into rites of passage or badges of honor (Pustz, 1999). Several of the quotations above from fanboys and fangirls can be viewed as a collective retelling of the rite of passage from youth to adult fandom, and references to addiction are ways of demonstrating true membership in the comic book fan community. Hills (2002:123) provides an insight on the use of the addict metaphor as he cites the common use of religious metaphor in fan cultures. "My interest lies in how one stigmatized group (fan

culture) may draw on the discourses of an already stigmatized group (religion and new religious movements), . . . only fans—as part of the cultural stigmatization of ‘excessive’ fandom—will be called upon to account for their pleasures and attachments.” Comic book fan discourse, therefore, is full of double meanings, constant irony, group identification, and rationalizations as fans grapple with their shared commitment to comic books and the stigma theory of their community. This discourse is even evident in certain comic books that deal with various issues in comic fandom in humorous and self-reflexive fashion, such as Dan Clowes’ *Ghost World* and John Kovalic’s *Dork Tower*.

An important part of the comic book culture is fanzines and conventions. Through them, the members of comic fandom collectively establish a national subculture set against normals’ stigma theory. Here we begin with an older generation of fans predating the fanboy and fangirl generations. These older fans of the 1950s and 1960s were part of the earlier mass audience of comic book readers. According to an early history of comic book fandom by one of its founders, beginning in the mid-1950s a small group of comic book fans began publishing fanzines (Schelly, 1999). Most fanzines were short-lived. The first long-running fanzine was *Alter Ego*, which started publication in 1961. By the mid-1960s, three basic types of comic fanzines were being published: article-based, collector-oriented, and fan-art. The late 1960s then saw a blossoming of fanzines with Schelly (1999) citing a list of 671 fanzine titles. Today, of course, the Internet has provided a perfect medium for fanzines, such as *Sequential Tart*, *iFanboy*, *Comicfanmag*, *Ninth Art*, and *Fanzing*.

This older generation also was responsible for creating the first comic book conventions. At first small numbers of fans attended these affairs. The first New York Comicon was in 1964. The first San Diego Comic Con was in 1970, and this annual convention would eventually become the biggest in the United States. Comic book conventions have involved a variety of activities, but the important point for our purposes is how conventions and fanzines, aided by comic book shops, made the construction of a community or subculture possible by fostering the group-formation of stigmatized individuals. From this community, individuals, groups, and organizations of “sympathetic others” constructed an alternative theory of comic books and comic book fandom. So as the stigma theory about fanboys arose, the subculture of comic book specialty stores, conventions, and fanzines provided a community that young fanboys, and eventually fangirls, could join as members. A comic writer and illustrator pointed to the importance of this subculture in his complaint about media portrayals of fanboys. “They always portray us as geeks and losers. So, yes, in comic book stores people

get along. It is a certain subculture and we have to stick together” (*National Post, Toronto Edition*, 4 May 2002:T03).

The world of comic books, however, is not a homogeneous and completely harmonious subculture. Hills (2002) argues that within fan cultures there are competing theories of value and competence. Pustz (1999) discovered that in comic book culture there are competing theories and subgroups whose interests diverge. At the most general level, I would argue that there are three different theories of value within the comic book subculture: collectors, fanboys, and alternatives. Each subgroup and theory of value has its own professional fanzines: collectors have *Comic Book Artist* and *Comics Buyers Guide*; fanboys have *Wizard*; and alternatives have the *Comics Journal*. The collectors’ theory of value focuses roughly on pre-1975 comic books and comic book artists (*Comic Book Artist*, June 2002:7). Alternatives’ theory of value rests on legitimating comic books as serious adult “sequential art” that is as worthy of respect as novels or painting, and they complain about the dominance of superhero comic books and fanboys in the subculture (*Comics Journal*, January 2002:14–15). Fanboys’ theory of value supports contemporary superhero/fantasy genres, including adult-oriented and alternative-oriented material. Obviously, some comic book fans “cross-over” among subgroups and theories of value, but many of the tensions and distinctions generated within this subculture follow along these three lines.

While comic fandom as a whole has its own subgroups and different theories of value and competence, its status as a marginalized and stigmatized fandom in the United States unites these groups as victims of normals’ stigma theory on comic books. The overarching stigmatization of this subculture means that the internal distinctions are both painfully avoided at times and aggressively embraced at other times. Attacking fanboys and the superhero genre is somewhat ideologically contradictory, given the strongly shared view that the stigmatization of popular comic book genres is the worst thing that has happened to American comic books. To attack fanboys and superhero comics is oddly to join the ranks of the moral crusaders of the 1950s. On the other hand, frustration among alternatives and others on the state of the market leads to constant complaints about the limited nature of the market and to attacks on dominant genres, mainstream publishers, and fanboys. Of course, infighting and pointing the finger of blame is not uncommon when any cultural community is in crisis. The economic crisis that struck the comic book market in 1993–1994 has led to a more contentious subculture that highlights the boundaries of distinction.

The cultural economy and theories of competence in the world of comic books also point to a rather contradictory, if not ironic, aspect of the stigmatization of fanboys and fangirls. Given the marginal position

of the subculture of comic books, the extent to which normals consciously express a stigma theory about fans of comic books—aside from a more general view of fans of popular culture—is not clear. Certainly, on the basis of my review of the general press, one cannot argue that fanboys and fangirls are ever even written about. As much as the subculture of comic books becomes a way to legitimate comic book readers, ironically the stigma theory of fanboys and fangirls seems to arise more from inside the subculture than from outside. The marginality of this subculture seems to generate a perceived stigma theory of normals that articulates the alienation felt by fans of a marginal, stigmatized, and misunderstood cultural form. This is not to suggest that, if confronted by this subculture, a normal might not apply a stigma theory; rather, many normals are unfamiliar with this subculture and are hardly aware that comic books are still sold and read!

FINAL NOTE

The world of comic books since the 1930s has confronted stigma and its effects in virtually all the ways highlighted by the framework introduced in this article. This history of comic books shows how stigma is a social construction shifting over time in terms of its ideology and focus of attribution. Whether focused on comic books, comic book artists, comic book shops, comic book readers, or comic fandom, stigma is constantly in flux as normals and the stigmatized negotiate the meaning and significance of comic books. This history shows that the social phenomenon of stigma outlined by Goffman and other scholars meshes well with the ideological battle over comic books and the actual experiences of artists, fans, publishers, and retailers. It also shows that stigma is different from low status. As is commonly lamented in the subculture of comic books, in American culture only pornography seems to have the privilege of being more stigmatized than comic books.

This case study of comic books highlights a rarely addressed question in research on popular culture. Outside of censorship, how can stigma affect a cultural form? Given the global discrediting of comic books as both subliterate and only fit for children—mutually reinforcing stereotypes—the evolution of this cultural form has been significantly disrupted. The first attempts at widening the content and readership of comic books in the late 1940s and 1950s were subsequently squashed by a successful moral crusade. The underground comic book movement and alternative comics have also experienced censorship and prosecution, and normals—book publishers and readers—seem unable to view comic books as legitimate, serious literature. So, the beleaguered evolution of comic books in North America is not

inherent to the medium itself but reflects in part a stigma theory that helps to impede its development.

The general decline of the comic book market certainly has played its part in hindering the development of this medium, and this decline has been attributed not only to the anti-comic book crusade and the introduction of the Comics Code. One cause for the early decline in the comic book market was new competing media, particularly television (Sabin, 1996). The continued decline since the 1960s has been attributed to the lack of financial viability of mass distribution for traditional comic books, as well as to the complete separation between the direct market distribution system for comic books and the system of mass distribution for print and literature (*Comics Journal Special*, October 1997). But these factors do not fully explain the arrested development of comic book aesthetics or perceptions of the comic book outside comic book culture. The evidence is compelling that stigma played a role in the obstacles faced by more “adult-oriented” and “serious” comic books (Sabin, 1993).

Over just the last few years, however, the efforts of publishers, artists, and fans in comic book culture to break through the barriers to this medium seem to have finally born some fruit. Beginning around 2002, graphic novels—comic books in book-length format—captured the attention of both booksellers and publishers (*Publishers Weekly*, 23 December 2002:21). Professional journals for librarians also began to take graphic novels seriously (*Library Journal*, 1 February 2002:55; *School Library Journal*, 1 August 2002:9). The market for graphic novels has continued to grow over subsequent years, with Japanese *manga* representing around two-thirds of the market in 2005 (*Publishers Weekly*, 6 March 2006:18). Even mainstream book publishers are now beginning to recognize that comic books can present sophisticated narrative and visual art, and engaging adult material (*Publishers Weekly*, 22 August 2005:30; 18 April 2005:23). And the general press, from *Entertainment Weekly* to the *New York Times*, now reviews graphic novels. The recent success of film adaptations of comic book series also have given comic books greater visibility (*Los Angeles Business Journal*, January 2006; *Daily Variety*, 20 July 2005:4). With the recent success of graphic novels catering to both children and adults, and the success of film adaptations of comic books, perhaps normals have finally discovered that the American comic book is a unique and complex art form.

CONCLUSION

Several of the scholars cited in this essay suggest in various ways how the positions of academic scholars often blind them to both the existence and power of stigma in culture. To put it in other terms, many academic

scholars have accepted official stigma theories without question. While recent scholarship, such as a new generation of feminist scholars in cultural studies, has worked to deconstruct official stigma theories about popular culture, certainly more can be done to spread the word. And I would emphasize that putting stigma front and center is not simply cultural politics, that is, not simply an ideological battle over cultural distinctions, but is a critical politics that addresses the “real” negative effects of discrimination against cultural forms and practitioners. As Link and Phelan (2001) stress, stigma as an object of study places discrimination and power front and center in any social analysis.

I also hope to have demonstrated how stigma and status are two different social processes. Again, of course, status and stigma are interrelated. One could argue that low status is a prerequisite for the activation of stigma theories against cultural forms and individuals. But low status is not a guarantee of being stigmatized. Stigmatization is a qualitatively greater and different level of subordination than low status. The case study of comic books shows how normals’ stigma theory has greatly affected comic books as an art form, as well as those who have produced and consumed them, and the negative effects have gone beyond a question of low status. The most striking aspect of stigma theories versus status theories is the pathologizing and moralizing that usually underpin stigma theories. Stigma is not simply a matter of taste, although that distinction remains, but a matter of discrediting forms and individuals as lacking in some fundamental way and often deserving of immediate intervention.

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